

Gastrointestinal (GI) Illness

Fact Sheet

What is it?

Gastrointestinal illnesses are a broad group of diseases involving vomiting and/or diarrhea. Most often in congregate settings, GI illnesses are caused by norovirus (also referred to as the “stomach flu” or “stomach bug”), a common and very contagious virus. These illnesses are not related to the flu, which is a respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus.

What are the symptoms of GI Illness?

Symptoms often begin suddenly, about 12-48 hours after exposure. Most frequently, these symptoms include:

- ⇒ Nausea and vomiting
- ⇒ Watery, non-bloody diarrhea
- ⇒ Stomach cramps
- ⇒ Fever and chills
- ⇒ Head and muscle aches

Most people recover fully within 1-3 days. In more serious cases, dehydration (loss of fluids) can occur and may result in the need for medical attention.

How is GI Illness spread?

The virus leaves the body through the **stool (feces) and vomit of infected persons**. It easily spreads from one person to another. People can become infected with the virus by:

- ⇒ Eating or drinking items contaminated with norovirus, including those prepared by an ill food handler.
- ⇒ Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, then making contact with their mouth.
- ⇒ Sharing food, utensils, or personal hygiene products with an infected person.
- ⇒ Inhaling virus released when an infected person vomits.
- ⇒ Having close contact with an infected person.

Infectious persons are most **contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill until at least 3 days after symptoms end**. These illnesses are a common cause of outbreaks in congregate settings, including schools, childcare centers, long term care facilities, and cruise ships.

How are GI illnesses diagnosed and treated?

A healthcare provider usually makes the diagnosis based on a person's symptoms; laboratory testing of stool or vomit is only conducted in more serious cases or when it is necessary for outbreak response. Treatment consists of drinking plenty of fluids and adequate rest; antibiotics are not effective against most GI illness-causing agents.

What can be done to prevent the spread of GI illnesses?

- ⇒ **Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water** after using the bathroom, changing diapers, before eating, and before preparing food.
- ⇒ **Promptly clean and disinfect toilets, sinks, and other areas that may be contaminated.** Wash the area with soap and water, then disinfect with a solution of 1/3 cup household bleach mixed with 1 gallon of water. Leave on the surface for 10 minutes, rinse, then let air dry.

For more information, please contact your health care provider or visit the Center's for Disease Control and Prevention webpage on Norovirus: <https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/index.html>



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Revised: May 2021